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Forcing Shrubs and Trees for Indoor Bloom

By R. T. FOX

Forcing branches of shrubs and trees indoors is one of the most rewarding winter pleasures for gardeners and lovers of nature. Flower buds of spring-blooming shrubs and trees are already fully formed in the fall. After a period of cold weather, the buds are ready to grow when warmth and moisture are supplied.

Ordinarily at least six weeks of cold temperature are necessary before flower buds will break dormancy. Therefore, branches may be brought indoors for forcing any time after the first of January.

What to Cut

Most trees and shrubs show an abundance of buds along the younger shoots. The larger, fatter buds are usually flower buds. The smaller buds are usually leaf buds. Look over the branches carefully to determine which contain a plentiful number of flower buds. Select only branches that are well budded. Many fruit trees bear flowers on short branches called "spurs." Look for these "spurs" when selecting cherry, apple, pear and ornamental crab branches to force. Keep in mind the place where you will be displaying your forced branches, and the type of container you will be using. You will then be able to select the branches that are most useful. Select branches that have interesting curves, angles, or straight lines according to your arrangement needs and the limitations of the plant form.

How to Cut

Judicious pruning practices should be followed. Prune the branches flush with trunk or main branch so that no stubs are left. A clean, flush cut will heal rapidly with little danger of insect or disease damage. If branches over one inch in diameter are cut, paint the exposed wound to prevent entrance of disease organisms.

Exercise care in cutting, not only to obtain desirable branches for forcing, but to retain the essential form of the plant. Take branches from several shrubs to avoid robbing a single plant of all its blossoms. Remember that no new buds will form to replace those you remove in the winter. However, a few branches carefully trimmed from a medium sized shrub will never be missed.

Treatment after Cutting

The branches will be forced over a period of several weeks. During this time, a clean cut stem end has a tendency to seal over. Shredding or mashing the end of the stem encourages water intake in woody materials. Use a hammer to pound the end of the stem on a wooden chopping block, a large stone, or a concrete floor.

Next, moisten the bud scales. In warmer regions or in moist areas along the seacoast, this moistening may not be necessary. In cold inland areas, however, the branches should be soaked overnight in room temperature water. A large laundry tub or the bathtub can be used for this soaking.

Another method of moistening the branches is to wrap the tops with damp burlap for several days. This is a good method if large quantities of branches are forced. The branches also may be sprayed with water several times a day. All of these methods of adding moisture tend to simulate the conditions of the natural growing season.

After soaking the branches overnight, the crushed ends are placed in pails of water for forcing. A piece of charcoal placed in the water will help to prevent the water from fouling. Change the water about once each week.

The Forcing Period

The cans or pails containing the branches should be placed in a relatively cool spot to allow the buds to develop. A temperature of 60°F. to 65°F. is best. High temperatures speed up bud development, but reduce the size, color, and keeping quality of the blooms. The lower humidity usually present in warmer rooms also causes buds to dry and drop before they bloom. If you will remember that these plants ordinarily bloom in the spring when the temperature is in the 60's, you will easily realize that high temperatures are not good.

In the initial stages the branches need not be placed in the light. They may be kept in a cool cellar, a pantry, or in any other cool place. As soon as the buds are plump, however, the branches should be brought into the light in order to have the colors develop. The room should be well lighted but the branches should not be placed directly in a sunny window. The heat of the sun on a clear day is too intense and causes rapid but poor development to occur. An ideal place for this stage of forcing is a cool bedroom or a sun porch that is only partially heated.

When to Arrange

When the buds are well developed and some color is evident, the branches should be removed from the pails and placed in containers for display. Branches taken from a crowed pail at this stage are less likely to have bruised or broken flowers than are branches removed in full bloom.

In any case, do not delay making arrangements with the forced branches until the blossoms are open. You lose not only the fun of watching your arrangements develop, but you also lose a good part of the display time.

How to Arrange

Forced branches may be arranged by themselves or in combination with other materials. Tall vases may hold long branches in upright gracefully curved designs. Low bowls are good for vertical, "L" shape, triangle, fan, crescent or free-form designs. A cone shaped design in a round bowl is excellent for the center of a table where it can be seen from all sides.

For making arrangements in low bowls, needlepoint holders are the best for holding branches. Split the ends of thick, woody stems to fit them onto the needlepoints more easily. Pieces of moss, bark, pebbles or bits of shale can be used to cover the holder. In tall containers, a roll of one-inch chicken wire makes an excellent holder. The container may also be filled with sand, or shredded plastic foam.

To keep your forced materials as long as possible, move your arrangements from warm rooms to cool bedrooms at night and during any daytime hours when you are not at home to enjoy them.

Trees and Shrubs for Forcing

Almost any tree or shrub that blooms or leafs-out in early spring can be forced indoors. The length of forcing time varies with the kind of plant, the location, and the time it is cut and brought indoors. Varying the species and time of cutting will insure continuous bloom until spring arrives.

Acer rubrum, red maple, produces small, orange-red flowers in clusters. Forces easily and quickly.

Aesculus hippicastanum, horsechestnut, has attractive, umbrella shaped leaves and pyramids of flowers.

Alnus rugosa, swamp alder, is a native shrub common to swamplands. Long yellow catkins develop in less than two weeks.

Acer platanoides, Norway maple, produces clusters of small yellow-green flowers.

Amelanchier laevis, shadbush, is a small native tree with white cherry-like blossoms that force quickly.

Betula pendula, European birch, has graceful curving branches with quick-forming pendulent catkins and delicate green foliage.

Carya ovata, hickory, has slowly unfolding leaf buds ot a lovely bronze-green color.

Cercis canadensis, redbud or Judas tree, slowly develops small, magenta-pink pea-shaped flowers on curving branches before leaves appear.

Chaenomeles lagenaria, flowering quince, has light red-orange flowers. It is one of the best shrubs to force because the flowers are fairly long lasting and especially colorful.

Cornus mas, Cornelian cherry, is a member of the dogwood family with small yellow flowers in clusters. Forces easily in two weeks or less.

Cornus florida, flowering dogwood, is the native white dogwood. Forces very slowly and flowers do not open as fully as they do out-of-doors. However, its lasting quality and beautiful form make a trial worthwhile.

Forsythia species, forsythia, produce yellow flowers in profusion. It is one of the most popular forcing shrubs because of its bright color and ease of forcing.

Hamamelis vernalis, witchhazel, is one of the earliest shrubs to bloom out-of-doors, and an easy shrub to force. The gracefully curved branches have a delicious spicy fragrance.

Larix laricina, larch, or Tamarack, is a native American tree with the most delicate tracery of green needle-like leaves. The branches have an oriental line that makes them beautiful alone or in combination with other materials.

Juglans species, walnut, butternuts, develop slowly. The light green foliage forms an interesting pattern on angular branches.

Lonicera species, honeysuckle, has single or clustered pink or white flowers. Some varieties bloom very early, and some are very fragrant.

Magnolia species, magnolia, produce large, striking creamy white to deep red flowers. Forces quickly and easily. The angular, heavy branches create an interesting pattern even without flowers.

Prunus armeniaca, apricot, is relatively tender in New York State. The white flowers are abundant but relatively short-lived.

Prunus species, cherry, of common fruit and ornamental varieties produce white or pink flowers in clusters on short spurs.

Prunus triloba, flowering almond, has delicate pink flowers, easily forced.

Pieris japonica, andromeda, has evergreen foliage with clusters of small white lily-of-the-valley-like flowers. Flowers develop in less than two weeks.

Pyrus communis, pear, has coarse brown twigs that provide a good contrast to the delicate white flower clusters. Flowers are borne on spurs.

Malus species, apple, crabapple, produce white, pink or red flowers on fruit and ornaental species. Flowers are on spurs. Double flowering forms force more slowly but last longer.

Quercus species, oak, unfurl delicate bronze-red leaves that gradually change to pale green. The gnarled branches form interesting line designs.

Ribes alpinum, alpine currant, has light yellow flowers and small green leaves.

Salix caprea, pussywillow, has large silken-white catkins or "pussy-willows". Some improved cultivated forms are very large with a pink tone.

Spiraea prunifolia, bridalwreath spirea, has small white flowers along straight or slightly curved thin stems. The double flowering form lasts longer than the single form.

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